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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the importance of an emphasis on word meaning skills as part of an objective-based approach to the development of reading comprehension at intermediate grade levels. To aid in determining the meaning of an unfamiliar word, two strands of word meaning skills are proposed. One strand concentrates on the use of word parts, while the other strand deals with the use of context clues. A rationale to justify the inclusion of these skills in a reading comprehension program is presented. Each strand of skills, sequentially though not hierarchically arranged, is discussed. The research process pursued in the identification and delineation of these skills in objective form is described. Some consideration is also given to the instructional implications of this proposed outline of word meaning skills. (Author)

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ONE ROUTE TO IMPROVED READING COMPREHENSION:

A LOOK AT WORD MEANING SKILLS

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ONE ROUTE TO IMPROVED READING COMPREHENSION:

A LOOK AT WORD MEANING SKILLS

A reading teacher at the intermediate level has two goals for the students: increasing their word knowledge and improving their reading comprehension. To achieve these goals the reading teacher must first select materials which will most appropriately "fill the bill" for the particular situation. What materials does the reading teacher have to choose from? Available for teaching word knowledge are generally word lists, memory gimmicks, spelling games and tricks. Available for improving reading comprehension is a separate set of materials, usually a collection of stories, each with its own set of comprehension questions. When the teacher has made the selection, instruction can begin.

What happens as a result of that instruction? Well, word knowledge will probably increase by anywhere from one word to the entire list of words used in the lesson. But, reading comprehension probably won't have been greatly affected. Discussions and/or question answering for the collection of stories will have improved reading comprehension--for that set of stories. But, any vocabulary learning will have been incidental. In other words, the goals, separately, will be a little closer to being accomplished. But--is that what the intermediate level reading teacher wishes to accomplish? Knowledge of a specific list of words or improved reading comprehension for a specific set of stories? No! What the intermediate level reading teacher is concerned about is increasing word knowledge or improving reading comprehension <u>regardless</u> of what a student is reading! The question is:

how does the reading teacher accomplish that goal? How does the teacher get the student to transfer what he learns in one book to what he reads in another? Isn't there some way of teaching vocabulary that will have a direct influence on improving reading comprehension? I'd propose there is a way: by teaching the skills necessary to determine and comprehend word meaning. These skills are what I want to discuss today.

First, a little background. In developing the Comprehension element of the Wisconsin Design for Reading Skill Development* the reading project staff at the University of Wisconsin Research and Development Center has been interested in devising a way to help teachers teach not just a specific story but instead teach the student to comprehend better every thing he reads. The key to teaching this transferability we have come to believe is to teach the skills, the tools of reading comprehension. For the past five years we have read widely and conducted research to identify these reading comprehension skills. While a developmental version of the Comprehension element was released over one year ago, we have continued to examine all available sources to arrive at the best possible, most comprehensive compilation of

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*The Wisconsin Design for Reading Skill Development is an objective based approach to reading developed with federal funding at the University of Wisconsin Research and Development Center for Cognitive Learning. To assist teachers in individualizing reading instruction for children from age five up the Design offers (1) a means of assessment through criterion referenced tests, (2) a unique management system which simplifies grouping for focused instruction, and (3) suggestions for teacher directed learning activities plus references to commercially published materials already found in most schools. Five of the six elements--Word Attack, Study Skills, Self-Directed Reading, Interpretive Reading and Creative Reading--have been completed and are available from the publisher, National Computer Systems/ Educational Systems Division, Minneapolis, Minnesota. The sixth element, Comprehension, is currently undergoing field testing and revision at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

literal reading comprehension skills. In evaluating the curriculum programs of school districts, the scope and sequence of basal readers and supplementary reading programs, standardized tests and professional literature we have come to the conclusion that reading comprehension skills can be categorized in four areas: word meaning, sentence meaning, passage meaning and sequencing. The skills necessary to extract meaning from words involve the most basic reading comprehension skills. If the child is to understand the meaning of a passage or a sentence, or understand the sequencing within or between sentences he must first understand the words. The ability to understand any given word will involve or can involve all those skills which have been traditionally linked with vocabulary development. This, in essence, is how we have come to the conclusion that reading comprehension and word knowledge or vocabulary development are linked--by the skills--common to both.

The reading project staff has determined that word meaning skills themselves can be subdivided into two strands consisting of: (1) those skills concerned with the use of context clues and (2) those skills concerned with word parts and how word parts affect word meaning. Let's look specifically at these two strands of skills.

CONTEXT CLUES

A context clue is, essentially, a hint about the pronunciation and/or meaning of an unfamiliar word. The hint, or clue, is perceived by examining the preceding and following words and/or sentences. By studying these surrounding words and their relationships to the unknown word, a reader may be able to gain some additional insight, as opposed to just automatically "giving up" when confronted with a word in print he doesn't recognize.

Among reading experts two popular views exist concerning context clues. One claims that context is used primarily as a word recognition skill. The other viewpoint contends that context can be used primarily in determining the meaning of an unfamiliar or unknown word. Those who feel that context is most useful in word recognition purport that "an adequate background of experience is essential for success in the use of context clues" (Deboer and Dallman, 1964). Experts in this camp are of the opinion that contextual aid(s) primarily help a reader with pronunciation, and meanings to words can only be derived with appropriate background experience.

Aulls (1970) states:

> McCullough (1943) and Artley (1942) originated an emphasis on the use of context as an aid to determining the meaning of an unfamiliar or unknown word. Since that time other reading experts such as Spache (1966) have made an effort to present context as a determinant of meaning in pedagogical texts. . . . (p. 67)

Spache (1973) expressed the idea that word recognition and pronunciation can often be achieved by phonic, structural and contextual analysis. But when the unknown word is not part of the reader's vocabulary, this method does not lead to the derivation of word meaning. Contextual analysis, which takes the reader beyond pronunciation to word meaning, may be more important for the reader's comprehension.

The staff of the Wisconsin Design for Reading Skill Development is of the opinion that using context clues as an aid to word meaning is an essential, literal reading comprehension skill. The reader's background and experience will obviously contribute to his effectiveness in using context clues. In those situations, however, where appropriate experience is lacking, the use of clues might elicit a "general notion" of word meaning which would contribute to overall comprehension. Thus, specific skill instruction in

the types of context clues generally employed would aid the child in establishing a "general notion" in those situations when he was lacking the proper experience.

In reviewing the professional literature concerning the identification of critical contextual clues, the staff found much of the evidence in conflict. This was true primarily because:

> . . . the clue categories, the response measures, the characteristics of sample populations, the conditions under which subjects were selected and tested differed markedly. . . . For example, four out of seven clues recommended by Artley and McCullough in the early 1940's (Rankin and Overholser, 1969) to be essential to the reading development of the elementary school child, recently have been shown to be the least useful clues in one study of fourth, fifth, and sixth grade children (Aulls, 1970).

Because of the wide variation in findings, the staff decided to examine a list of clues compiled by Rankin and Overholser (1969). Their list includes all contextual clues mentioned by seven authorities together with a frequency count of the number of authorities who have listed each clue. The staff then analyzed these clues and grouped them into categories. After much discussion, what resulted was a revised list comprised of what the staff considered to be the essential clues. If a child were to receive instruction in all of these clues, he would have an appropriate technique to approach most any contextual situation he would find in his reading. This revised list is shown in Table 1.

/ Insert Table 1 about here /

The "explicit" category includes those clues which clearly define or restate (via a sentence, phrase, or word) the meaning of the unknown word. In both writing explicit clues and locating examples of them in children's

materials it was determined that these clues varied primarily in length. That is, the clues appeared to be highly related and all were in some respect "definitional." They seemed to vary only in numbers of words. Therefore, an explicit clue of one or two words was labeled a synonym clue; a phrase or complete sentence was labeled a definition clue. An equivalent phrase(s) clue included up to two sentences, and a summary clue included two or three sentences.

The "implicit" category includes those clues which offer additional meaning or clarification, but not a definition for an unknown word. The cause-effect and the contrast and example types are self-explanatory. At this time research is continuing to more precisely define, as an implicit clue, the modifying phrase. Results of this research may indicate the modifying phrase is actually a part of another category.

The structure clues, actually typographical markings, are not important in and of themselves. They are used to clarify and to assist in pointing out either explicit or implicit contextual clues.

With context clues thus far the discussion has concentrated on identifying skills which will assist in determining the meaning of an unfamiliar word. There is one more consideration: an obscure meaning of a familiar word. In a dissertation study in 1970, Saeman established that it is more difficult for children to learn new meanings for old words than to learn new words. The explicit clues and implicit clues plus structure clue notations listed above are still employed, but now to redefine a familiar word.

The Wisconsin Design proposes for the context clues strand of word meaning study the following skills, defined as behavioral objectives:

Uses explicit clues: meaning

The child uses explicit context clues (e.g., synonym, definition, equivalent phrase, summary) to determine the meaning of an unfamiliar word in context.

Uses explicit clues: application

The child determines the meaning of an unfamiliar word in a context which contains explicit clues (e.g., synonym, definition, equivalent phrase, summary) and then applies that meaning in a second context where the same unfamiliar word appears but no explicit clues are present.

Uses implicit clues: application

The child determines the meaning of an unfamiliar word in a context which contains implicit clues (e.g., cause-effect, contrast, example, modifying phrase) and then applies that meaning in a second context where the same unfamiliar word appears but no explicit clues are present.

Uses explicit and implicit clues: uncommon meanings

The child uses explicit and implicit context clues to determine the obscure meaning of a familiar word in context.

WORD PARTS

Within a word itself can be found clues as to meaning, and, in some cases, more specific clues than can be offered by context clues. Deighton (1959) summarized the situation best:

> Context determines but does not always reveal the meaning of unfamiliar words. It is desirable to equip pupils with all available clues to word meaning within the words themselves so that they will neither have to guess blindly at meaning nor bring their reading to a halt from complete lack of understanding (p. 32).

Almost thirty years ago, Gray (1948) specified that the essential word parts to be studied should include roots, prefixes and suffixes. Spache (1973) concurred with Gray but added another type of word part to be considered, the combining form.

Generally reading experts support some type of word part study, but there is some controversy over the meaning(s) which are attached to word parts. Shepherd (1974) expressed concern about teaching those word parts which he believes can be defined in only vague terms. One solution was offered by Spache (1973) who suggested that two types of word parts be taught: meaningful units (items with singular meanings) and visual units (variant meanings). Thorndike (1941), on the other hand, in writing specifically about suffixes offered another approach:

> A suffix, like a preposition or a conjunction, may be hard to learn because it has many and subtle meanings; but that does not make it unimportant for learning or teaching. . . . It does require that we teach probabilities instead of certainties and have pupils think in terms of variables as well as constants. But is not this right and desirable in teaching the meanings not only of suffixes but of thousands of English words? A word is a living thing. Its sound and its meaning are not qualities which it has always and everywhere, like the properties of a chemical element, but are variables determined by those who speak and hear, write and read, and by the circumstances in which they say, write, hear, and see it (p. 73).

The staff of the Wisconsin Design is of the opinion that word parts should be taught with meanings insofar as that is possible. Bolinger's (1965) suggestion, that an acceptable meaning must be one recognized by "the majority of speakers," should be the guideline for any meanings chosen. But, while some meaning should be taught, the Design staff also emphasizes that flexibility, as suggested by Thorndike, is of great importance. Thus, the study of word parts should be considered as the study of an additional tool to assist in determining word meaning. Let's take as an example the word part called a prefix. The purpose for teaching a child about prefixes is to enable that child to make use of his knowledge and experience to recognize that a particular series of letters may, in fact, be a prefix

and then to recognize that that series of letters, when it is a prefix, carries a specific meaning which could modify the meaning of the base word. In other words, instruction should be geared to enable the child to use his knowledge of prefixes to help make more sense out of what he is reading. This same purpose should also be considered when teaching suffixes, roots and combining forms.

The Design staff proposes that to be effective the instruction for word parts must be in three phrases: (1) where the concept is developed that there is or can be a thing such as a prefix, suffix, root, or combining form; (2) where a knowledge of a specific prefix, suffix, root or combining form is developed so that the child has some background to draw on; and (3) where a child is provided opportunities to make use of this knowledge.

In formulating the lists of specific word parts to be studied the Wisconsin Design staff considered an important determinant to be the frequency of use for each word part. Basal readers, content area books and standardized tests were analyzed. In addition, specific research reports and pedagogical texts were considered (Barbe, 1961; Breen, 1960; Brown, 1958; Deighton, 1959; Gray, 1940; Smith, 1936; Spache, 1973; Stauffer, 1942). The resulting lists of specific word parts the staff feels offer a solid core; the child who is instructed in these word parts should have a substantial storehouse of knowledge to enable him to determine the meaning of a word.

The Wisconsin Design proposes for the word parts strand of word meaning study the following skills, defined as behavioral objectives:

Identifies word parts--prefixes

The child recognizes that a prefix is a meaning-bearing unit that can modify the meaning of a word in one of the following ways: (1) to signify range (e.g., sub-, super-, inter-); (2) to indicate time (e.g., pre-, post-); (3) to signify approval or support (e.g., pro-); (4) to signify opposition (e.g., anti-); (5) to signify number (e.g., bi-, tri-).

Identifies word parts--suffixes

The child recognizes that a suffix may serve either or both (a) to modify the meaning of a base word and/or (b) to identify the grammatical function of that base word.

Identifies word parts--combining forms

The child recognizes that combining forms (e.g., bio, graph) are meaning-bearing units that join together to constitute new words.

Identifies word parts--word roots (optional)

The child recognizes that some unfamiliar words may consist of prefixes or suffixes combined with word roots (e.g., fac, sta).

The combination of instruction in context clues and in word parts as outlined here should allow a great deal of flexibility in determining word meaning for the individual as he reads. Two additional factors need to be considered: (1) when to begin instruction, and (2) application of the skill instruction.

The Design recommends that instruction in context clues and word parts should not begin until the reader has become very proficient in his use of letter phonics and structural analysis. This should occur at approximately the third grade level for most children. Reaching the proper level of

proficiency is, of course, an individual matter and thus initial instruction must be adapted to the individual's needs. How quickly the child progresses through the four skills for each strand as outlined is again dependent on the individual child and his capabilities. It is anticipated that for most children the instruction would be completed sometime during sixth grade.

There is no reason that instruction in all context clues skills must precede any instruction in word parts. In fact, instruction in that order should be highly discouraged! Although context clues and word parts are used together to determine word meaning, specific instruction should be focused on context clues at one time while specific instruction should be focused on word parts at another time. Instruction focusing on the skill, not on the specific word, will allow for the transferability for which we are striving.

The application of skill instruction can be handled very simply if teachers indicate whenever possible outside the skill instruction period--in science class, social studies class, math class, in as many different situations as possible--the use of context clues and/or word parts in determining word meaning. Specific focused instruction in the skills plus attention to real life situations when those skills are used should help to develop a child's ability to increase his word knowledge and to increase his reading comprehension <u>regardless</u> of what he is reading.

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Table 1

CONTEXT CLUES

Explicit	Implicit
Synonym	Cause-effect
Definition	Contrast
Equivalent phrase(s)	Example
Summary	Modifying phrase

Structure

- Parenthesis
- Commas
- Dashes
- Quotes
- Underlines
- Question marks
- Type size (location)